Blog posts

Pass it on

A Brussels diary: Part 6

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 20 May, by Betto van Waarden

> Part 1 : Gone Fishin'
> Part 2 : Brussels requires a strong stomach
> Part 3 : The EU family
> Part 4 : Europe's fourth power
> Part 5 : Tower of Babel
> Part 7 : Theatre of the absurd

Eurosceptics want us to believe that Brussels is a behemoth, but that's not quite true. They point out that Europe is governed by an army of civil servants, but the European Commission employs just 33,000. "Just as few as the number of civil servants administering a medium-sized European city", they say in Brussels — although a city administration services several hundred thousand inhabitants while the European administration oversees 500 million. Nevertheless the EU admin remains, like national and local governments, a sizeable machine with hierarchies and formal procedures. How does it work? Let's take one simple example (without the stakeholder consultations, impact assessments, negotiations, etc): how the European Commission prepares for, and processes, meetings of the Council of the European Union.

The machine produces the speeches and briefings that a Commissioner needs to participate in the ministers' meeting. The original input is a text drafted by a low-ranking European official, which is revised by increasingly higher-ranking officials, until it finally lands on the desk of the Commissioner. The policy officers provide the technical expertise for the speech; the middle managers ensure it coheres with other EU policies and communications; the top managers tweak it to show sensitivity to the particular political situations in the 28 states.

As so many layers of hierarchy must check, possibly edit, and approve the draft, the deadline for the lowest-ranking official is weeks ahead of the Council meeting. Sometimes the deadline even precedes the outcome of the preparatory discussions among the lower-ranking officials of member states, making it impossible to write a final briefing and speech.

Officials improvise. Once the policy officer finishes the draft, it must be edited and approved by her deputy head of unit, her head of unit, her director, the official of the coordination unit (me), the deputy head of unit of the coordination unit, the head of unit of the coordination unit, the assistant of the deputy director-general, the deputy director-general, the assistant of the director-general, the director-general, the Commissioner's staff member responsible for inter-institutional relations, the Commissioner's staff member responsible for a particular topic, and the Commissioner's chief of staff. Between all these layers are the secretaries, who compile the edited versions and send them on to the next layer.

It takes a lot of time — especially since the cogs all have full agendas and can't immediately activate the next cog: sometimes it takes two days before a director has time to take a quick look at the draft. My colleagues in the coordination unit often do not receive speeches and briefings on time, while the staff of the Commissioner may call us every half hour to ask where the speeches are. Pragmatism and time constraints lead officials to forward speeches that haven't yet been approved by the in-between layers. "Send it, send it, just send that speech on," a colleague yelled one Friday evening, banging his head against the wall out of desperation.

The real stress only begins once it turns out that something substantial must still be changed or added. Then the speech has to go back to the lowest level, after which the entire chain must be completed again at the last moment. We constantly call the policy officers and secretaries of their superiors, who all try to cover themselves: "OK, I could already send you the document, if you assume responsibility given that it doesn't have hierarchy approval yet."

All of this concerns a Council agenda point for one Commissioner. When two Commissioners want to present something together, two Directorates-General must be activated simultaneously, and all cogs have to operate in parallel to produce a joint speech. Speeches are often not great even after so many checks: it would be better if one or two officials could really take the time to write a proper draft, rather than ten people looking at it in haste. But that's not how the machine operates.

After the speeches of the Commissioner and ministers — and also after Council meetings of lower-ranking officials — a policy officer or coordinator (me) writes a meeting report. This report must also be checked for factual content by a policy officer in the relevant policy unit and for political content by her head of unit, and sometimes even the assistant of the director and the head of unit of the coordination unit. Usually, there aren't many edits, but the support of states for a Commission proposal is sometimes overstated: "some support" was changed to "considerable support" and the comment that Hungary preferred the Parliament's amendments over the Commission's proposals was

left out. Sometimes the English is wrongly "corrected" by a non-native speaker. A head of unit emailed me: "I only had a chance to read your piece once and it looks very good. So I will read it again in more detail."

Finally, the report is written, checked by multiple hierarchical layers, and ready to be sent to the Directorate-General, the Commissioner's staff, and the Secretariat-General of the Commission. But then you are confronted with "cc stress": to whom do you send a copy (cc) of the report? You must not forget even the smallest cog. But by then the next meeting may have already taken place.